

The potential harm of web-sleuthing activities on the families of long-term missing persons and unsolved homicides: A Note on the Need for Regulation

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DOI: 10.70386/ijcpe.v1i1.13

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to identify a need to monitor and regulate websleuthing activities via networked online spaces. Websleuthing activities do vary but generally involve members of the public finding information, creating narratives, and forming hypotheses on a range of crimes. For some websleuths, their engagement with these platforms is recreational and done only for their personal gain, while others seek to help families. The problematic element of websleuthing activities is the individuals who traverse into digital vigilantes. Digital vigilantes pose problems for their ethical approaches to seeking information potentially breaching legislative rules adhered to by policing bodies and can border on harassment of the victim's family and friends. The area of concern for this article is how the lack of regulation can be detrimental to the families of cold case homicides and long-term missing persons. Through Pauline Boss' (1999) concept of "ambiguous loss", families seek investigative support online to find answers, obtain a degree of closure, and continue the investigation of their loved one's case. Websleuthing is one avenue of support for families. The authors' experiences of working with families of cold cases and long-term missing persons demonstrate how websleuthing practices can be harmful and further exacerbate the family's trauma. This article identifies why regulations on websleuthing activities is important, and how better management and monitoring of such sites can avoid families having unrealistically raised hopes and expectations.

Keywords: *Missing Persons, cold cases, websleuths, vigilantes.*

Introduction

The disappearance and death of Nicola Bulley in the UK has highlighted the issues surrounding online networked spaces and the practices of un-regulated members of the public. Some members of the public were seen to be seeking their own information from different sources, creating unsubstantiated hypotheses and narratives, and even conducting their own searches for Nicola's body. This information and their generated hypotheses featured heavily online in public forums, but these are not monitored, managed, or regulated by either the moderators of the sites, or external, independent bodies. Further, the families are not always aware that these activities are ongoing. Nicola's family repeatedly called for such activities to cease, and highlighted how they were further traumatising them, and with a belief that these activities were hindering the case's progress. As this note will explain, the online activities of individuals are referred to interchangeably as "websleuths", "armchair detectives", or "digital vigilantes" (Yardley et al., 2018). For families of long-term missing persons and unsolved homicides, there becomes a time where the police effort seemingly diminishes, no further work is being conducted, and the options for case progression feel limited. Thus, online platforms claiming to seek the truth, justice, and answers can appear attractive to families, and an extension of previous investigative activities (either through the formal police processes, or private investigators, hired by the family). However, the practices of websleuths via online networked spaces can be incredibly harmful for the family's investigative efforts, but also their wellbeing.

The need for a set of processes to regulate websleuthing activities to reduce harm and negative experiences is bore out of the author's work with families of long-term missing persons and unsolved homicides to conduct independent reviews of the case. In August 2020, [author's name] launched a cold case unit (hereafter referred to as "Unit") within a higher-education setting, which works alongside families, and engages students in professional activities alongside their studies. The Unit adheres to the police's current processes of managing and investigating long-term and unsolved cases, offering a professional service. Often, the Unit receives cases when families have either exhausted all perceived options with the police, have used private investigators to no avail, or their own efforts with public forums for further information or lines of inquiry have been less than helpful. The primary site of interest for this paper

is websleuths.com, launched by Tricia Griffith when searching for further information on JonBenet Ramsey's case (Hitt & Griffith, 2016). The paper addresses the activities of websleuths in more general terms, identifying their motives and information-seeking behaviours by engaging in these online platforms. Consideration is also given to how these activities are regulated currently, with identified improvements to the system, and the impact that they can have on the families of long-term missing persons and unsolved homicides.

The Emergence of Websleuths and Online Platforms

In recent years, there has been a growing interest from the public in unsolved homicides (UHs) and long-term missing persons (LT-MISPERS). Several streaming services (e.g., Disney, Netflix) and online platforms (e.g., podcasts) have catered to this demand with numerous true crime documentaries and dramas. Through these platforms, the viewers maintain a “non-interactive” role and are essentially another witness to the event (Zhen, 2021). A non-interactive role gives viewers a window into the crime, its investigation, and the lives of those impacted. This stance ensures that there is a degree of separation between the crime and its investigation to those who have an interest in it. Further, this separation ensures that there is minimal harm or impact on those with a personal or professional investment in the case.

However, the developments in information communication technologies continue to grow and has brought with it associated changes to the field of modern crime solving (Soothill, 1998). These developments have allowed citizens to participate in the solving of crimes, alongside like-minded individuals (Yardley et al., 2018). These activities are facilitated through several prominent platforms, including the Reddit Bureau of Investigations (RBI), The Doe Network and websleuths.com being the most prevalent to date (Yardley et al., 2018). The digitalised world and characteristics of contemporary culture has allowed virtual investigative communities to form (Miller, 2020; Yardley et al., 2018).

The websleuthing website, created by Tricia Griffiths, is pitched as a public relation, where the site is sold as a product to the public (Crimecon, 2017). The site is free to use and seeks to gain authenticity and legitimacy from the police, by becoming a free investigative resource that law enforcement can respect and use positively (Crimecon, 2017). However, the website is still described as secretive and blurs the

lines of official police work and unofficial investigative work (Crimecon, 2017). The website further identifies the site as being a resource for families to obtain help and make calls for support and further information. While it is known that the law enforcement bodies disapprove of the community (Crimecon, 2017), literature has yet to explore how families perceive these websites, what their experiences have been, and whether the sites have been beneficial.

To legitimise their activities, websleuths have enforced several rules and guidelines for their site. Within Figure 1, several rules can be seen, which have been created and are subsequently managed by the administrative team of the site. The rules state that any breaches of the guidelines will result in posts being deleted. However, they emphasise that they are not responsible for any errors or omissions found on the site.

Figure 1. *The list of rules and best practices underpinning the activities on websleuths.com*

	How often is Etizolam toxicity seen as cause of death? Celestialjustice · Saturday at 11:04 PM		Replies: - Views: -	N/A 
	Rules Copyright Rules imamaze · Mar 12, 2011		Replies: 1 Views: 36K	Feb 27, 2021 Sillybilly 
	Best Practices Dealing with your fellow posters WS Admin · Nov 22, 2009		Replies: 0 Views: 53K	Nov 22, 2009 WS Admin 
	Rules Rules on Sex Offenders Tricia · Nov 2, 2009		Replies: 1 Views: 71K	Nov 2, 2009 Tricia 
	Rules Reports to Moderators WS Admin · Jun 20, 2008		Replies: 1 Views: 41K	Nov 18, 2008 WS Admin 
	Best Practices Copyright Notice WS Admin · Jun 7, 2008		Replies: 0 Views: 31K	Jun 7, 2008 WS Admin 
	Best Practices Privacy Policy Statement WS Admin · Jun 7, 2008		Replies: 0 Views: 32K	Jun 7, 2008 WS Admin 
	Terms of Service Terms of Service - Long, Detailed Version WS Admin · Jun 7, 2008		Replies: 0 Views: First message reaction score: 5	Jun 7, 2008 WS Admin 
	Terms of Service Terms of Service - Short, Plain Language Version WS Admin · Jun 7, 2008		Replies: 0 Views: 49K	Jun 7, 2008 WS Admin 

Further, the site is mindful that if they have content restrictions and remove posts then their guiding principle of resolving cases and seeking justice (Crimecon, 2017) may be brought into question by users of the platform. However, as with the rules of the site, these posts are only managed by the moderators of the platform, rather than a professional or official organisation. While there is a caveat that users of the site may be exposed to offensive, indecent, or objectionable content, the onus is

very much on the individuals to manage themselves and the content that they engage with. Thus, the site fails to capture or remove all inappropriate or distressing comments, hypotheses, and theories that can appear on the website. This can have further negative repercussions for how law enforcement views these sites.

To mitigate against negative conversations pertaining to law enforcement, engaging in conspiracy theories, harmful content, or personal attacks on the families and friends of the missing and/or murdered, the websleuths platform has offered different membership options. Specifically, websleuths allows members to become verified as either an “expert” or “professional”, which are two separate profiles. Experts are those deemed to know the victim, or those associated with the inquiry and subsequently identified through media reports. These experts are only needing to provide their name and contact details, with no guarantee that efforts are made to verify someone’s association with a case. Further, there is no fail safe for individuals with ulterior motives being inappropriately recognised as an “expert”. In addition, “locals” who live in the area pertinent to the case do not require verification but still post distressing and inappropriate content. For example, members of the public around Lancashire, where Nicola Bulley disappeared, were accepted onto different online platforms, including websleuths as “local” profiles, where inappropriate content was posted. In Figure 2, a local to Lancashire uploaded pictures of the police searches for Nicola’s body. Although the poster has blurred the image of Nicola’s body, it can still be distressing for family members, friends, and other members of the community.

Figure 2. A “local” poster showing the recovery of Nicola Bulley’s body in Lancashire.

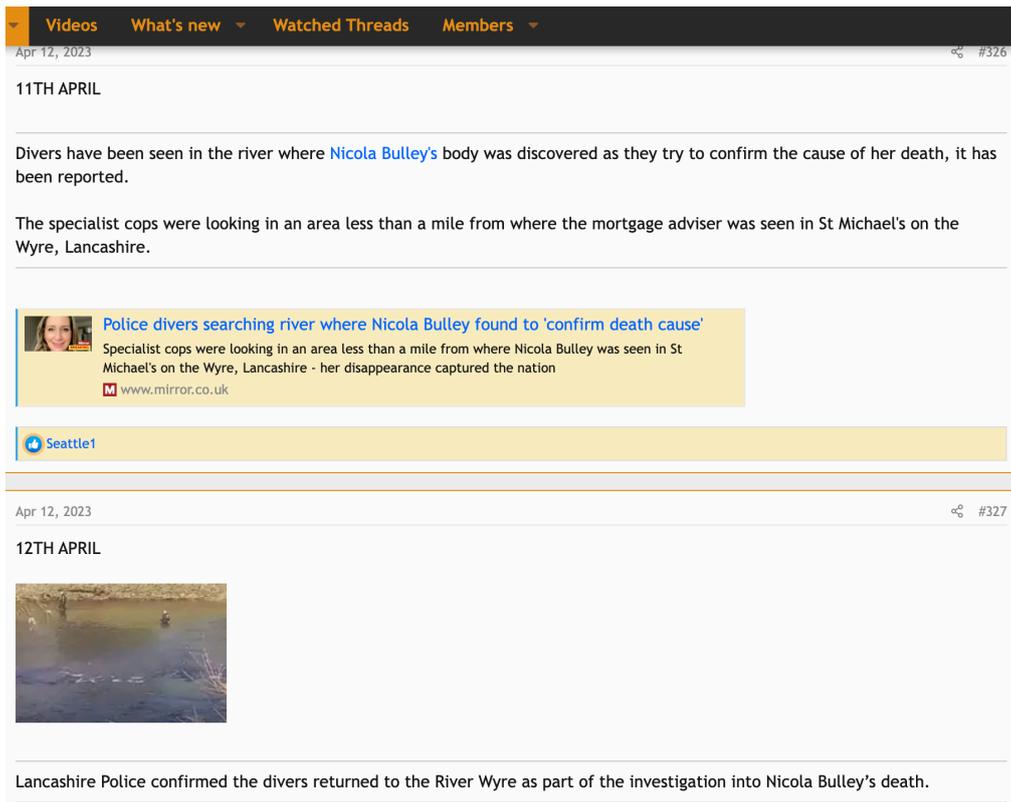


Figure 2 is the epitome of distressing content that users of the websleuthing site are warned of. However, the suitability of this post for such a platform can be questioned, and it poses concerns for the police's investigation and any legal processes. Further, Nicola's family repeatedly called for such activities to stop, but long after the case began and body recovered, online posts such as those in Figure 2 continue to be displayed.

The police routinely separate themselves from the activities, which does lead to some discord between the parties. The police typically maintain a negative view of websleuths, with a believe that their activities will hinder the investigation in some way (Yardley et al., 2018). The image in Figure 2 would likely fall under this remit. Although blurred, it identifies the work ongoing in the investigation which the police may not have been privy to sharing yet. The police are constrained by several legislative requirements (e.g., the Police and Criminal Evidence Act, 1984) for the processing of evidence and information, the presentation of information for court proceedings, and the protection of all parties throughout the process (e.g., witnesses, victims, and suspects). Websleuths are not subject to such requirements and are free to use multiple sources to obtain information while they partake in their online activities. Over time, the lack of regulation on these platforms may lead to, or encourage vigilantism,

for the perceived lack of law enforcement attention. As such, online platforms may contain a wealth of information obtained by websleuths which was not previously in the public's domain. Further, some of this information may be police records or data, which has not been legitimately obtained.

While these activities fail to portray online platform sites in positive ways, there are still efforts ongoing to legitimise websleuthing sites. Websleuths.com does this by distinguishing between "experts" and "professionals". Professionals are identified on the site as lawyers, psychological experts, and "others" (without specific indication of what other professionals might be considered on the site). Using professionals, which may include current or retired law enforcement personnel, creates a sense of validity and accuracy for the site. This also creates a sense of legitimacy for the families of missing or murdered loved ones, who think those with intimate knowledge of investigative processes will be of benefit to them. Nevertheless, once verified as professionals, individuals can post content that they deem relevant, which may not be subject to the same scrutiny as other posts (e.g., avoiding conspiracy theories, inappropriate narratives, and hypotheses).

The use of professionals can also legitimise the family's interest in using these platforms, believing a fresh set of eyes for the case, different views, and hypotheses, can help progress their loved ones' case (Keel, 2008). If the family also view content on the platforms that is not common knowledge or discussed by law enforcement, it may continue to make such sites and activities attractive to families as they may believe progress is possible. By also offering dedicated forums and associated discussions for each case, the families may believe a thorough investigation is being pursued by members of the site. Given that families often have a perception that the police are not actively pursuing their loved one's case or giving it sufficient attention (Wellman, 2018), they may view online networked spaces as an attractive option.

[The Families of Long-Term Missing Persons and Unsolved Homicides](#)

After Nicola Bulley's body was recovered, the family explicitly stated that the online activities and involvement of the media had been detrimental to their wellbeing and grief process. This is not a new phenomenon, or issue, and has been experienced by several other families in similar circumstances in recent years. Through working with families of long-term missing persons and unsolved homicides, several families

have attempted to seek case progression and/or closure through online sites. Some family members are incredibly proactive in generating an online presence to continue “re-advertising” their loved ones’ case (author cite, 2020; Wellman, 2018). This presence, and desire to find answers, has left them vulnerable to exploitation and unrealistically raised hopes.

For example, one mother was using YouTube to discuss the investigation into her son’s disappearance over thirty years ago. As the investigation continued, there were discrepancies in the narratives developed by the police and the mother, primarily surrounding the last known sighting. This was covered in the YouTube video, and someone came forward to say they had seen the victim in a nightclub several months after the police recorded his last known sighting. The mother was energised by this comment, as it would help support and further her narrative. However, despite numerous efforts to communicate with the commentator, she would not engage with the mother. Later research discovered that the commentator would have only been around 10 years old at the time of the sighting and so would not have been in the nightclub. This was upsetting for the mother and left her deflated thinking she was back at square one. For families in similar circumstances, this vicious cycle can be easily created through engaging with online platforms.

Pauline Boss’ (1999, 2016) theory of ambiguous loss is an important concept in determining why family members may engage with online platforms. Boss (2002) stated “not knowing whether a loved one is dead or alive defies emotional comprehension” (pg. 39). Family members are left in a precarious situation, awaiting news as to whether their loved one is dead or alive, as this is not a proven concept for them (Jones et al., 2007). This situation is often reflected in the family members engaging in absolute, or binary, thinking where some may believe and act as though their loved one is dead, or they might completely deny their loss with a pretence that nothing has happened. Until families receive information confirming either scenario, they are in a frozen grief process (Boss, 1999). From experience, the authors have recognised that family members often switch between the two ways of thinking. Sometimes, family members are adamant their loved one has died when a significant birthday or other family event has occurred: a consistent belief that they would not have missed the occasion, so the only explanation is their death. There is often a sense of deflation and acceptance during these periods, but they do not consistently stay in this frame of thinking. Over time, they may continue the search for their loved

one, receive new information, or simply have a change of mind which alters their thinking into their loved one being alive. “[The] awkward position [of] not knowing whether to hold out hope or give in to grief” (Worden, 2008: 62), can encourage family members to seek further information to allow them to engage in binary thinking more easily. It would also likely reduce their emotional state when faced with new information.

Glassock (2011) made a distinction between two concepts: “searching within” and “searching without”. *Searching within* refers to internal searching of a person’s whereabouts (Glassock, 2011), which can include people asking themselves questions and searching for justification for a missing episode. Conversely, *searching without* is the external, or physical, searches to find a person (Glassock, 2011). During the initial stages of someone’s disappearance, a lot of the families we have supported have relied on the police to identify suitable lines of inquiry, search parameters, and find answers for them. Over time, they recognise that the police have not been as effective as they would have hoped, and so they have engaged in their own investigations. Importantly, there can sometimes be a cloud of secrecy around the investigation into someone’s disappearance or death, and so the police can be actively working on the case but unwilling to disclose information for fear of jeopardising the investigation (author cite, 2023). The families can be left feeling isolated and unsatisfied with progress, but they are just not privy to the work ongoing. The police often report unwillingness to update family members on information uncovered during their investigations, for fear of raising their hopes unnecessarily (author cite, 2023; Walton, 2013).

Wayland et al. (2016) recognised a difficult navigational process for those experiencing long-term absences (six months or more: Jones et al., 2007). As such, while trying to navigate the unclear space between accepting a loved one’s loss and the lack recovery to them being alive (Boss, 1999), family members can attempt to sway their own beliefs through different avenues. One of these involves engaging with the police to see if there have been any changes in the case, trying to obtain media coverage, or conducting their own searches. Most of the families supported in the Unit have engaged in their own *searching without* activities, often at their own expense. One family has travelled to numerous places around the country in hopes that they might see their loved one, after following tips and information from members of the public. The families feel that they must pursue these sightings as they have little faith

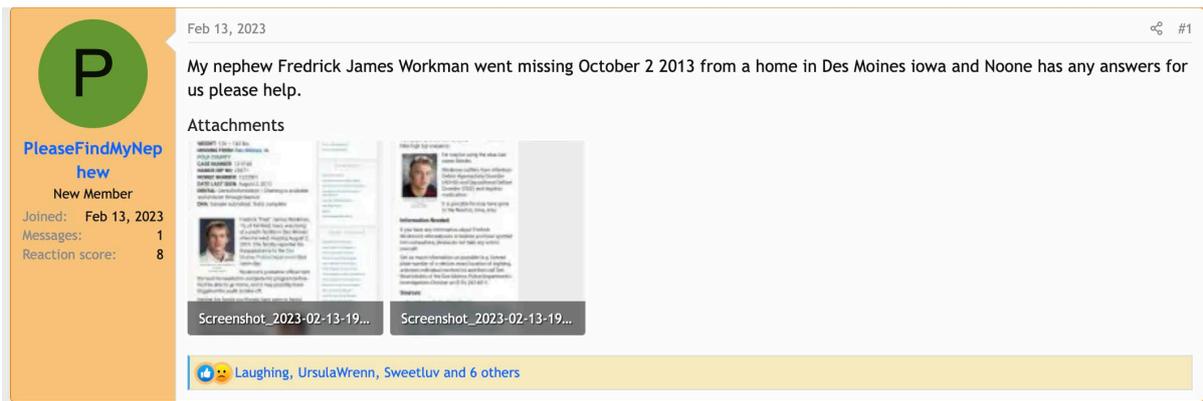
that they police would. It is through our experiences in these situations, that the police have often assessed the validity of such sightings through their own processes and systems and determined this to not be a viable sighting. As such, they have not pursued it any further. There was a tendency from some forces to actively pursue all sightings within the early period of the investigation but were less willing to physically search as the case progressed. Again, this indicates to families that the police are not actively attempting to resolve their loved one's case and further incentivises families to search for other opportunities.

[An Alternative Investigative Resource?](#)

Through earlier work, the author identified 2748 unsolved homicides within the UK (author cite, 2020; author cite: 2022), and with diminishing police resources (see Fleetwood & Lea, 2022) and a shortage of investigators (Hill, 2020), another option for families is needed. While the police have been continuously assessed as the only service available to missing persons and unsolved cases, the current period of austerity and low resources warrants consideration for other avenues to search for information, and to support the families of such cases.

In the UK, charities such as Missing People UK and Support After Murder and Manslaughter (SAMM) offer pastoral support to families, but not for the investigative processes. There is the option of private investigators, but this is often beyond the realm of the family's personal finances. As highlighted earlier, families do use the media themselves to potentially identify witnesses, new information, or possible sightings. Through the work in the Unit, we have recognised that when family members move into Boss' (2016) concept of "dialectical thinking", there is an increase in their online presence and searches for information. Further, the families are not necessarily focused on their loved one being dead or alive, simply searching for answers. As demonstrated in Figure 3, the websleuths website allows family members to post a request for support.

Figure 3: *A family member searching for answers in their nephew's disappearance. The post is accompanied with several posters with descriptions and pictures, which appear made by the family rather than a professional entity.*



While members of the site have “reacted” to the post (e.g., liked the post), at the time of writing, it had not received any information about the case that would offer any chances of progression. It may be that there is little information available for websleuths to “mobilise”, or the post is not generating sufficient attention. Websleuthing is applicable to interest and reactions being prioritised for high-profile, ideal victims, as is the case in traditional media platforms (e.g., newspapers, televised news; Christie, 1986; Wellman, 2018). While members of the websleuths website participate for multiple reasons, they are only able to engage in the investigative process if they have information. Wasterfors et al. (2023) summarised websleuthing as “investigative efforts within digital communities to solve a crime case or identify a suspect” (pg. 2). Thus, to allow members to transition from a passive, non-interactive role to a more active member of the investigative process (Yardley et al., 2018), they require information to progress their narratives, hypotheses, and searches for further information. cases which do not receive sufficient information initially, may struggle to generate interest from the online community. This can be further upsetting to family members, as explored in Wellman’s (2018) work.

Generally, groups or individuals will gather on networked online spaces to search for information, upload either documents, pictures, videos, or audio accounts to create narratives of the case, engage in debate and discussions, and attempt to identify suspects (Nhan et al., 2015; Yardley et al., 2018). For some members, this is a recreational hobby which they participate in for interest, curiosity, entertainment, or even a desire to help (Zhen, 2021). Not all members will post harmful, derogatory, or malicious content on the sites, and are looking to help posters, rather than with a desire to be competitive in material posted, as was demonstrated in the Nicola Bulley case.

An area of attraction for families is the range of members of the site with different skill sets (Nhan et al., 2021), who often mobilise quickly to start working on the case. For families feeling ignored by the police, with a desire to obtain further information, the quick mobilisation of websleuths can be an attractive option for families. However, because this quick immobilisation typically occurs during times of crisis and insecurity, websleuths, their activities, and platforms, can be mistaken for vigilantes (Huey et al., 2013). The lack of monitoring and regulation of websleuthing platforms can also encourage, or at least fail to deter, vigilante acts from occurring online.

Vigilantism is “a process where citizens are collectively offended by other citizen activity and coordinate retaliation on mobile devices and social platforms” (Trottier, 2017: 55). Vigilante behaviour does have similarities to websleuthing due to its shared perception of wrongdoing (Yardley et al, 2018), however, websleuths are far more complex and do not solely retaliate. Instead, within a community, they organise a response through conducting research, creating platforms and hosting content (Fisher and Bishop, 2015). Although websleuths have been recognised academically as different to vigilantes (Trottier, 2017), the police question if web sleuths are a form of advanced neighbourhood watch or a group of dangerous hunters (Trottier, 2017). There is a fragile relationship between web sleuths and the police as public support for vigilante behaviour is associated with a lack of faith in the Criminal Justice System (Sharp et al., 2008). An example is “paedophile hunters” who typically generate vast amounts of media interest for their quick identification and action against those committing offences against children (Tippett, 2022). Upon following the actions of paedophile hunters, the public begin to anticipate and expect a particular response from law enforcement. If this is not received, the police can be viewed as weak and heartless, which further encourages websleuths to “pick up the pieces” and “do the work of the police” (Tippett, 2022). Although the cases of interest in this paper are UHs and LT-MISPERS, the same reactions may be experienced by family members who expect a dedicated, continuous response to their case which they think the police are failing to do.

It was recognised earlier that the police can seek to minimise websleuths involvement in their cases. This was demonstrated in Yardley and colleagues (2018) examination of 97 news articles: the police strongly emphasised that websleuths did not solve the crime, and that there were significant limitations to their work. While the

specific limitations of websleuths were not outlined, one concern pertains to the ability of securing prosecutions. Families experiencing UHs, and particularly LT-MISPERS, have repeatedly said they only want to find the person responsible, or recover their loved one's remains. At this time, they do not consider the longer-term aspect of progressing through the criminal justice system towards a prosecution and hopeful conviction. Part of our work is ensuring the chances of a prosecution are not reduced, or impossible, because of the family's engagement with non-legislated or governed individuals.

However, websleuths, families, and the police are in a complex relationship. Firstly, websleuths do use police files and data to base their search for further information (Zhen, 2021), but the legitimacy of obtaining this information is unclear. The police's desire to be a separate entity to websleuths and their activities, does create questions for whether their obtainment and use of police files are legal or not. The police may be further incentivised to ignore or distance themselves from websleuths due to their interpretation of police files, data, and intelligence.

However, the police are facing a decline in personnel, resources, and time in a period of rising crime rates. While the police are primarily accepted as the only investigative tool for such cases, it is possible that they are unable to devote sufficient time to all unsolved or long-term cases. The police's work is legitimised through their adherence to legislation and approved investigative practices, which is a primary difference between the police and websleuths/online communities.

The Unit has also experienced mistrust with the police, where there is concern on their behalf of our intentions and motives for working on LT-MISPERS and UHs. Some forces, in our experience, have been unwilling to engage in dialogue, and thus there has been no collaborative working to either help identify areas of case progression, or to support the family. There has, however, been some progress with police forces in the UK, where a degree of information exchange has occurred. While we do not necessarily work collaboratively, we have a relationship where questions can be asked, and clarity is provided on areas we have been progressing during the review process in the Unit. This is a positive step forward, and there have been meaningful progress with police forces and our work on LT-MISPERS and UHs. Recently, the Unit met with a police force to discuss some prominent theories surrounding an UH and the possible links to a known, convicted offender in the area. It was an open platform with questions answered, ideas shared, and some ideas of

how the case could progress. This is a positive step forward in how Units such as ours can help progress cases, support families, and work with police forces. There must be a degree of trust between those conducting independent (to the police) activities on LT-MISPERS and UHs and the police force responsible for them. Should that trust be breached in any way, such as inappropriate use or dissemination of information, the relationship will cease to exist and there will be hesitancy from other forces too.

Reddit's involvement in the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings is an example of how law enforcement may struggle to trust such sites and activities (Nhan et al., 2017). Reddit is an online networked community used to work with likeminded individuals on a range of different cases. Members used Reddit to help the police after the bombings to try and identify the perpetrator(s). Instead, their actions led to the misidentification of innocent bystanders and instances of mishandling data: the reddit users vilified the innocent, publishing private and personal data for the falsely accused to get slandered (Nhan et al., 2017). The activities of Reddit members not only created problems for those wrongly identified, but also in how the police view such activities and sites. There may be reluctance for them to engage in these platforms for fears a similar situation might occur. It can be difficult to amend this perception when the damage has already been done. One way in resolving some concerns could be through the regulation of online networked communities.

Areas of Possible Regulation for Online Platforms

There is recognition that the families of UHs and LT-MISPERS are in a precarious, complex, and difficult situation. This is best conceptualised through Boss' (2007) concept of ambiguous loss, and the concept of dialectical thinking (Boss, 2016). As such, it is important that their expectations are carefully managed and considered during these activities. There are processes in place for this within the police, namely using Family Liaison Officers (FLOs). There does become a time, however, when this resource reduces, and families are left to navigate this situation seemingly alone, other resources become attractive to them.

Websleuthing is an attractive option for some, and while the police choose to not acknowledge their work, they do have the potential to be beneficial to law enforcement. They could be a free investigative resource for the police, reducing the economic burden the police are experiencing, all while maximising the opportunities to achieve justice. There are several police volunteers used to assist investigators, including

Special Constables, Crime Stoppers, and Neighbourhood Watch (College of Policing, 2020). These individuals are vetted to the same level as support staff and are appropriately trained in applicable legislation and investigative processes, where necessary. It is possible that websleuths are subject to some degree of vetting, to ensure their actions, motivations, and information collection processes are legitimate, and not a potential detriment to ongoing investigations and future prosecutions. While this may be difficult for the police to manage, there could be scope for online platforms and their administrators to vet their members more thoroughly.

Websleuths.com does have strict rules for individuals wishing to become members (Crimecon, 2017). However, these rules are enforced by the site's administrators which does lead to some degree of subjectivity, and questions on the suitability of the administrators to appreciate and implement legislative requirements for the admissibility of evidence in court. It is possible for administrators to be vetted, with a current or former background in law enforcement, to vet members joining the online sites.

Websleuths.com does imitate police hierarchies, which demonstrates the skills, status, and ranks of websleuths within their communities (CrimeCon, 2017). The concern with this approach, however, is the competition that can arise. Members can compete to get the highest score reaction or to become a verified professional, which may increase their unethical approaches to data collection. These posts are not always quickly, or sufficiently, captured by administrators or website safeguards, and so they can be within the public domain quickly. There should be a way of vetting each post before it is included within the public site. This is offered on some Facebook groups, as a way of ensuring the page's rules are adhered to. Again, this does rely on the administrators being attuned to what content is appropriate or not. It should be a requirement that individuals who have engaged in harmful, unethical, or illegal activities via online spaces should be permanently excluded, with safeguards offered to prevent them using fake accounts.

Aligned with police hierarchies are individuals on the platforms known as "case insiders" (websleuths, 2022). These individuals are known to the family or friends of a victim before the incident occurred and often have intimate knowledge of either the victim or the offence. It is possible that these individuals could be given more prominence within the hierarchies to legitimise the knowledge and content shared

online. At present, it is unknown whether having such knowledge of the victim, their family, and the incident would allow them to be ranked higher than others.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to call for better monitoring and regulation of websleuths and their online activities. This commentary does not attempt to stop individuals enjoying websleuthing work as a hobby, or form of entertainment. However, there is a need to monitor content posted on different platforms, ensuring there is not inappropriate content posted to serve a competitive need for legitimacy or validity via the sites. While websleuthing is the generation of information and discussion of the crime event, which seeks to provide answers and justice for the victim and their loved ones. However, some activities, publication of content, and reaction from the public and police can sometimes blur the line with websleuthing and vigilantism. Vigilantism is a particularly problematic form of online discussions and actions as a reaction to crimes, with paedophile hunters being one example.

The actions and activities of websleuths do pose an attractive alternative for the families of UHs and LT-MISPERs, who are stuck in a frozen grief process (Boss, 2007). By immobilising quickly, locating information not readily within the public domain, and creating alternative hypotheses, these actions can seem a viable route for families. However, there are no safeguards to support the family throughout this process, ensuring no further harm is experienced, and that the case could still be viable for a prosecution through appropriately gained evidence. There is not only a need to regulate the activities of websleuths, but also to understand the grief process and support required of families in these circumstances. By not considering their trauma and grief processes, these families can be more susceptible to exploitation via networked online spaces. It is recommended that the work of websleuthing, their administrative processes for monitoring and vetting, and uploading of content and subsequent discussions are further scrutinised to identify the most suitable, and effective, strategies for monitoring and regulating.

For families in the precarious situation of accepting their loved one's possible death, there must be consideration of how online networked spaces can unfairly and unrealistically raise their hopes (Duggleby et al., 2009). The police are perhaps better versed in their approach towards such families, and what support might be beneficial for them. In the wider remit of this under-explored field, the regulation of websleuthing

activities must accompany familial, pastoral support within the boundaries of the law to prevent harm, exploitation, and unfairly raised hopes and expectations.

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